

THE AMERICAN VETERAN
EPISODE 8, SEGMENT 2

SEPTEMBER 2005

JIM BENSON

THE HURRICANE TESTED V-A STAFF THROUGHOUT THE REGION. PLANS TURNED INTO ACTION, ENHANCED BY COMPASSION AND INGENUITY.

AMY LESNIEWSKI, ACTING CHIEF NURSE, BILOXI, MS

WE ARE TRANSPORTING SOME PATIENTS TO JACKSON, OUT OF THE AREA, CAN YOU GO WITH THEM AND SERVE AS AN ESCORT?

VA NURSE

YES I CAN.

LESNIEWSKI

OK, THANKS, I'LL LET YOU KNOW ABOUT THE TIME LATER.

JEFFREY T. BATES, DIRECTOR, GENERAL MEDICINE INPATIENT TEAMS

WE HAVE HAD NO SHORTAGE OF PEOPLE VOLUNTEERING, STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE, WANTING TO DO STUFF, JUST PHENOMENAL.

CHRISTIANE JONES, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

WE ACTUALLY ACTIVATE OUR HURRICANE PLAN WHEN THE STORM GOES INTO THE GULF OF MEXICO.

LESNIEWSKI

EVERY YEAR WE COME UP WITH EMPLOYEE LISTS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO GO IN PLACES OF NEED.

ED TUCKER, DIRECTOR, HOUSTON VAMC

I KNOW WE HAVE FOLKS FROM ALASKA, AND CALIFORNIA, AND NORTH CAROLINA, KANSAS, MISSOURI.

LARRY TOWNSEND, PATIENT

EVERYBODY HAS BEEN PLEASANT AND A NICE. THE STAFF IS WORKING REAL GOOD TOGETHER, EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE NOT FROM THIS AREA A LOT OF THEM.

BENSON

IN LESS THAN 72 HOURS, THE HOUSTON VA MEDICAL CENTER GYMNASIUM WAS TRANSFORMED INTO AN OUTPATIENT CLINIC. VA VOLUNTEERS FROM ALL OVER CAME TO DO THEIR PART.

MICHELE PAETOW, NURSE VOLUNTEER, LOUISVILLE, KY

THEY WERE YOU KNOW TRYING TO GET US ORGANIZED INTO HELPING HERE AND HAD US UP ON THE FLOORS KIND OF FLOATING AROUND UNTIL THEY WERE READY TO GET US DOWN HERE AND START PITCH IN.

BENSON

FROM SETTING UP A RECEPTION AREA TO EXAMINATION ROOMS, NO JOB WAS TOO SMALL. VA VOLUNTEERS ALSO SET UP DONATIONS CENTERS IN ALEXANDRIA AND BILOXI.

LINDA WITBECK, VA VOLUNTEER, ROSEBURG, OR

WE HAVE A QUITE A FEW WHO HAVE LOST EVERYTHING, THEIR WHOLE HOMES ARE GONE, IT IS A SLAB. WE GIVE THEM CLOTHES AND FOOD AND SUPPLIES THAT HAVE BEEN DONATED TO US .

BENSON

WITH NEW ORLEANS AT THE CENTER, PATIENTS - AND OFTEN THEIR FAMILIES - WERE MOVED, AS KATRINA'S RIPPLE EFFECT SPREAD THE DAMAGE.

TUCKER

WE COULDN'T HAVE MOVED THE FIRST PATIENT IF WE HADN'T HAD FOLKS IN THE COMMAND POST WHO WERE MAKING SURE WE HAD THE SUPPLIES WE NEEDED.

RICHARD BASHOOR, PATIENT, RELOCATED TO HOUSTON, TX, VAMC

THE PLANE I WAS ON, I FOUND OUT THEY WERE ACTUALLY GIVING UP SOME OF THEIR SEATS SO THAT THEY COULD GET MORE PEOPLE ON THAT WAS AMBULATORY.

JOSEPH HOLCOMB, PATIENT, BILOXI VAMC, AND WIFE, REBECCA

THEY IMPRESS ME BY BEING SO CARING, I MEAN IT IS LIKE PATIENT CARE IS THEIR NUMBER ONE PRIORITY AND THAT IS WHAT WE NEED.

BENSON

WHILE DOCTORS, NURSES AND OTHER HOSPITAL STAFF ARE CARING FOR PATIENTS, THEY TOO ARE SUBJECT TO STRESS.

FERN A. TAYLOR, MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY VAMC

UNFORTANTLY THE FIRST FEW DAYS I PROBABLY GOT ABOUT SIX HOURS OF SLEEP ALMOST WITHIN A THRITY SIX HOUR SPAND.

LOUISE DOLEY, PHARMACY EMPLOYEE

WE HAD NO POWER. EVENTUALLY THE PHONES WENT OUT, THE ELEVATORS WENT OUT. WE HAD NO RUNNING WATER. WE HAD NOWHERE TO SLEEP, SO WE WERE CONSTANTLY WORKING 20 HOUR DAYS.

BENSON

IN STRESSFUL SITUATIONS LIKE THIS, PATIENTS AND STAFF COULD SUFFER FROM POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER.

DR. KALAVAR, MD, DIRECTOR, PRIMARY CARE

IF THEY NEED A MENTAL HEALTH APPOINTMENT, FOR WHATEVER REASON, WHICH I THINK MOST OF THEM WOULD REQUIRE, AND THAT IS THE REASON WHY WE HAVE A COMPLETE MENTAL HEALTH OPERATION WITHIN PRIMARY CARE.

LINDA VOX, NURSE VOLUNTEER, DAYTONA BEACH, FL

WE JUST LET THEM TALK BASICALLY AND WHATEVER THEY WANT TO SAY, JUST LET THEM SPEAK THEIR MIND AND LET THEM VENT THEIR FRUSTRATIONS AND ANYTHING LIKE THAT. BUT MOST OF ALL, JUST LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU ARE THERE AND THAT YOU CARE AND YOU ARE WILLING TO HELP AND GET THEM BACK TO SOME NORMALCY IN THEIR LIFE.

BENSON

VETERANS AFFAIRS SECRETARY JIM NICHOLSON, VISITED THE REGION, AND THANKED THE VA STAFF FOR THEIR DEDICATION.

SEC. NICHOLSON

TO ME IT IS STRIKING WHEN YOU THINK THAT THESE PEOPLE WHO STAYED IN THESE HOSPITALS, INCLUDING THIS HOSPITAL AT BILOXI, FOR DAYS AT A TIME WHILE THEIR OWN FAMILIES AND THEIR OWN HOUSES WERE ENDURING THIS STORM BUT THEY STAYED RIGHT WITH THEIR PATIENTS.

BENSON

A SENTIMENT ECHOED BY PATIENTS TALKING WITH DR. JONATHAN PERLIN, UNDERSECRETARY FOR HEALTH.

PATIENT

WE'RE BLESSED TO HAVE THIS STAFF

PERLIN

WELL THAT IS WHAT I AM TOLD. THEY BUNKED HERE FOR THE PAST FEW DAYS.

PATIENT

OH YES, THEY BUNKED HERE. YOU KNOW THAT THE THING ABOUT IT IS, ALONG THE HALLWAYS HERE, THE HURRICANE (WAS) COMING AND THEY (WERE) STILL TAKING CARE OF THE PATIENTS AND THEY GOT A BEAUTIFUL SMILE ON THEIR FACE.

PERLIN

IT'S JUST THE VA AT ITS BEST. WE'RE A FAMILY. WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER AND WE HAVE AN EXTRAORDINARY MISSION TAKING CARE OF

VETERANS. THE PEOPLE IN VA, AS ALWAYS, HAVE DONE THE BEST JOB IN GOVERNMENT.

BENSON

THE EFFECTS OF THE HURRICANE ARE FAR FROM OVER. MANY VETERANS AND STAFF ARE HOMELESS AND HELPING THEM TO GET THEIR LIVES BACK ON TRACK IS OUR NEXT TASK.

ONCE AGAIN HOW TO CONTACT VA IF YOU NEED HELP WITH YOUR BENEFITS IN THE WAKE OF THIS SEASONS HURRICANS:

ON THE INTERNET: WWW.VA.GOV

FINANCIAL BENEFITS: 1-800-827-1000

HEALTH BENEFITS: 1-800-507-4571

PRESCRIPTIONS: IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF A PRESCRIPTION REFILL AND ARE ABLE TO TRAVEL, CONTACT THE VA FACILITY NEAREST YOUR EVACUATION SITE AND REQUEST ASSISTANCE.

DISABILITY AND PENSION CHECKS: IF YOU NORMALLY RECEIVE A PAPER CHECK, OR IF YOU DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR FINANCIAL INSTITUTION, YOU CAN OBTAIN A PAPER CONVENIENCE CHECK BY CALLING 1-800-827-1000 OR BY VISITING ANY VA REGIONAL OFFICE IN THE COUNTRY.

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